

FEATURE



Students from Milwaukee Lutheran High School's Free Enterprise Academy were hosted recently by Bill Nasgovitz, chairman and chief investment officer of Heartland Advisors, in the company's downtown Milwaukee office.

Teaching capitalism

Area programs focused on free enterprise education

By Lauren Anderson, staff writer

ON A RECENT AFTERNOON in Heartland Advisors Inc.'s downtown Milwaukee office, chairman and chief investment officer Bill Nasgovitz quickly chronicled the story of how he got to where he is today – his journey from Milwaukee Lutheran High School student to founder of an investment firm that today manages roughly \$1.5 billion.

Sitting around the large conference room table was a group of seven business suit-clad high school students from Nasgovitz's alma mater. They are part of Milwaukee Lutheran High School's Free Enterprise Academy, a new "school within a school" that offers curriculum centered on economics, personal finance and entrepreneurship, rooted in the constructs of capitalism.

"Free enterprise, free markets,

entrepreneurship, financial literacy, self-discipline – we're taking these concepts and incorporating them into the existing curriculum and creating new courses and programming around those concepts," said Shannon Whitworth, director of the Free Enterprise Academy.

Visits to corporate offices, like Heartland Advisors, are an important part of the academy's message to students: that success is within reach and, underpinning those opportunities for advancement, is America's capitalist system.

"Remember," Whitworth told his students at Heartland Advisors, "the person who created all of this was walking the very same halls you're walking now. This can be done. It's not insurmountable ... It is a matter of what direction do you want to point your life in, whether you're willing to work hard enough to make it a reality."

As studies indicate attitudes in the U.S. are warming to socialist principles, and politicians are increasingly bringing policies such as free public college and universal health care into mainstream political discussions, area programs like the Free Enterprise Academy

are working to educate students about an economic system that could be at risk of falling out of favor among young people.

"In a lot of places, capitalism is seen as a pejorative, it's seen as a negative," Whitworth said.

"But when you look over the course of history, no other economic system has lifted more people out of poverty than capitalism, and free markets and free enterprise. These are things that should be celebrated."

Milwaukee-based nonprofit organization EconomicsWisconsin works to bolster education about the free market and free enterprise system in Wisconsin elementary and secondary schools.

It's a distinct mission, said EconomicsWisconsin executive director Bob Glowacki. While many other programs drill in financial literacy skills, such as preparing for college tuition or balancing a checkbook, EconomicsWisconsin focuses more on the principles underlying America's economic system.

"We look at where am I in the economy as a consumer, as an entrepreneur, as a member of the

labor force," Glowacki said. "For us, we think it's critical that young students understand the interplay between economics, their own lives and even our history."

The organization, which was founded in 1963 as an affiliate of the National Council for Economic Education, provides curricular resources, sponsors training seminars and provides classroom materials to Wisconsin teachers. It also hosts two annual competitions – The Stock Market Game and EconChallenge – for students to put those concepts into action. In 2018, nearly 8,000 students participated in the challenges.

EconomicsWisconsin recently announced it will bolster its resources under a new partnership with Carroll University, which will allow the organization to lean on its business school's expertise to develop curricula for economics teachers.

"We have a deep commitment to support the principles of the free market system. Never has the most successful country in history been more at risk for losing the very foundation that made it successful," said Greg Grambow, chairman of the EconomicsWis-

consin board of directors, and president of Du-Well Grinding Enterprises. "And, we at EconomicsWisconsin believe the way to combat this trend is to reach out to the K-12 population explaining the facts and benefits of our economic system so our students can make informed lifelong choices."

Glowacki said the current political moment underscores the importance of promoting economic education.

"We really feel that understanding our role in economics will drive students' understanding of the world and how to interpret all they're going to hear in the 2020 elections," he said. "The piece of how economics connects to our current events is underappreciated by most people. But if you don't know the basic terms, how can you understand changes in interest rates or changes in gas prices or changes in taxation?"

David Borst, executive director and chief operating officer of the Family Business Leadership Partners, was an instructor for MLHS's Free Enterprise Academy this past school year. At a time when capitalism isn't "in vogue," he said the academy's mission is urgent.

"We believe capitalism is under attack," Borst said. "We wish to instill in young people ... that to truly get ahead, they need to look to supporting the basic tenants of capitalism and free enterprise. That will get you farther ahead than getting government handouts."

Whitworth believes these concepts are particularly important to teach at MLHS, as it serves a growing number of economically disadvantaged students through the Milwaukee Parental Choice Program.

"(Black, economically disadvantaged students) are, in my opinion, the ones who are getting

the worst information on how to handle money, how to use the tools of free enterprise in order to build businesses, what are businesses used for, how do you use the tax advantages of corporations and investment in order to help lift yourself out of poverty," he said.

Whitworth, whose professional background included 22 years as a practicing litigator in southeastern Wisconsin, made the pivot to education after a stint with the Wisconsin Institute for Law and Liberty, followed by three years as a prosecutor with the Ozaukee County District Attorney's office. At the time, his personal interests had increasingly narrowed in on issues related to urban poverty, as his conviction that financial literacy was part of the solution grew stronger. Meanwhile, in the DA's office, he realized that financial education was key to prosperity, which in turn deters crime.

"I thought, if I can reach some of these kids before they make the decisions that wind them up in the criminal justice system then I have done some real crime prevention," Whitworth said.

In his role with the Free Enterprise Academy, his goal is to see students graduate "financially literate, entrepreneurially savvy," equipped to climb the corporate ladder or build their own business from the ground up, if they so choose.

Ideally, Whitworth said, when his current students are in position to do so, they will create jobs and hire from within the community.

"I believe that the only way you will get peace in our inner city neighborhoods is to have these homegrown businesses who are creating prosperity and showing other people in our communities the path toward economic success in a capitalist society," he said. ■



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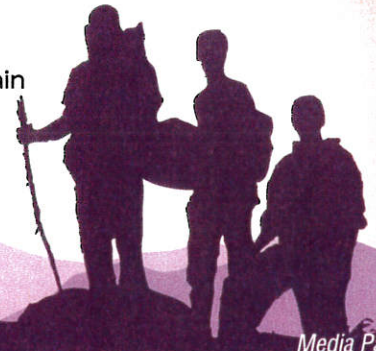
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